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ABSTRACT

Two female students worked together collaboratively as a strategy to counter the alienating discursive practices of the classroom. Hopefully, their experience might show that community can serve as a contingent response to situations of exclusion and teach the possibilities of collectivity too long omitted from conceptions of literacy. The link between academic discourse and masculine styles of expression often gets described as a kind of historical accident, when in fact, according to Miriam Brody, the denigration of the feminine and the development of androcentric literacy was a conscious and systematic process. Literacy has developed as individualistic and academic, characterized by a mastery of language, the presumption of objectivity, the use of logic to uncover truth, and writing in a plain, declarative style. The two female students had little interaction during the course, each being randomly assigned to work in different small groups. Their work, however, was not respected in their respective small groups (it was dismissed as "cute little stories"), and this brought them together. In the study they collaborated on, the two students found significance in both the style and content of their writing; they support conclusions about women's complete discursive marginalization made by M. F. Belenky and her colleagues in "Women's Ways of Knowing." Involvement is one of the traits that unites these writers, a certain quality of reading, an affective dimension marked by receptivity. (Contains 11 references.) (TB)

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Where Community is Possible: Collaborating on the Margins

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One of the more challenging claims in Sharon Crowley's self-described curmudgeonly response to the MLA volume Contending with Words is her announcement that most of us have not comprehended the "enormity" of postmodernism. In "Re-imagining the Writing Scene," Crowley admits suspicion about our readiness to overthrow all the conceptual props on which the discipline of composition has been established. Crowley's doubts are well-founded, for substantial part of that re-imagining means discovering ways to substitute "collective but shifting 'subject positions'" for outmoded conceptions of writers as "integral, autonomous, individual selves" (193).

Naming names, as it were, one of the important conceits currently contested in the discipline that comes in for scrutiny by Crowley is the concept of community. Crowley indicts a good measure of community talk as wish-fulfillment, complicit with larger social structures of domination because the bucolic image of community excludes the political struggles that simultaneously threaten and make it possible.

I intend to use this paper to suggest some ways the concept of community remains viable, if not inseparable from the collective identifications Crowley urges. Specifically, I will discuss the collaborative work of two female students to consider how working together emerged for them as a strategy to counter the alienating discursive practices of the classroom and how doing so created the conditions for different voices to emerge in their

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writing. Ultimately, I am interested in how community can serve as a contingent response to situations of exclusion and teach the possibilities of collectivity too long omitted from our conception of literacy.

It has become a rhetorical commonplace to cite Raymond Williams's commentary in Keywords on the idea of community, and so beginning this paper I pay those dues. The central insight offered by Williams is that in a culture whose central definitions remain so utterly contested, the word community bears a singularly positive cast.[1] For this reason community, as Joseph Harris points out, continues to be a rhetorically powerful conceit, a term containing such performativity that almost by its utterance alone it speaks itself into reality (13). What Williams finds more important, however, is that in addition to the paucity of unfavorable usage, community lacks any positive oppositional term. Harris finds in this a tendency toward sentimental emptiness and, worse, an assumption of consent that obscures the power relations operative in any social structure. Undichotomized, it is hard to find any leverage, linguistic or otherwise, to work against community. Or any reason to.

Community as it is typically used suggests the weakest of affiliations, and would seem to exert the slightest normative pressure, which could explain the absence of positive opposition. At the same time it communicates membership, the semantic elasticity of the term preserves the irreducibility of the individuals who constitute it. Highlighting the social element in its composition, community hides its political and material relations. Sociologist

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[1] Williams's observation seems dated in the face of the increasingly euphemistic phrase "the black community." See below on "like-mindedness" for an explanation of why this euphemism is both erroneous and offensive.

Robert Bellah has described how traditional communities, rooted in place and time, have been displaced in American culture by social networks he calls "lifestyle enclaves" adding that as the values of individualism intensify, people experience and characterize their participation in groups on the basis of their interest and choice. As Joseph Harris puts it succinctly, "In the place of physical nearness we are given like-mindedness."

Communities are both real and imagined, material and abstract. Organized around the assumption of at least minimum like-mindedness about our purposes there, the classrooms we inhabit are idealized as places containing differences of opinion but agreement on a core set of values--including fairness, rationality and a regard for truth--which secures the right of membership for all persons there. As a material reality, our classrooms are beset with ideological conflict, differing values of literacy, various forms of socialization.

Postmodernist theory and recent history have done much to dismantle assumptions of like-mindedness, further complicating the matter by questioning its very possibility. The whole of the consensus debate is too large to consider here, but key to it's saliency for composition is the role of literacy and discourse in shaping the subjectivities that make community possible.

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The link between academic discourse and masculine styles of expression often gets described as a kind of historical accident, which is to say, academic writing took on the characteristics of male language use simply as a consequence of men's social dominance. In Manly Writing, however, Miriam Brody argues persuasively that the denigration of the

feminine and the development of androcentric literacy was a conscious and systematic process.

Brody's work examines composition texts and "advice literature" to present a complex history of instrumentalist language consciousness, grounding the development of transactional rhetoric in material conditions, emerging philosophies of mind, and a metaphoric and social context designed to privilege the masculine by containing the feminine. As Brody explains "Imagining the making of knowledge as a brutal assault on female nature, the early Enlightenment rhetoricians represented composition as the task of a male hero who wrested truth from a world that had newly yielded itself up to scrutiny" (32).

Pursuing the evolution of this rhetoric, Brody finds that the industrial and commercial context of American society helped redefine the "terrain to be conquered as internal and individual" (33). The product of this development is a literacy we know as individualistic and academic, characterized by a mastery of language, the presumption of objectivity, the use of logic to uncover truth, and a plain, declarative style as the chief form of expression. The writerly subjectivity resulting from such literacy teaches the habits of solitary introspection in order to find knowledge by looking inside oneself.

Literacy has until recently been guided by consensus on these values. The nascent history of composition has been mostly the record of the fracturing of that agreement. Yet a good bit of it tacitly survives, which, I imagine, is a cause of much of Crowley's doubt.

Opposing claims of the naturalness of this androcentric rhetoric, alternative paradigms of language and knowing have appeared in the last twenty years. Brody's

history is a welcome supplement to the studies of gender and language responsible for naming the particulars of female socialization. The work of Gilligan and Belenky et al. in psychology, Keller and Harding in philosophy of science, and Spender and Tannen in linguistics has shown that what manly rhetoric and androcentric science called the "weakness" of women's minds and the "excesses" of their discourse are part of a complex epistemology interpreting the world and responding to social relationships in vastly different ways.

I must assume a enough familiarity with these writers to abstract very generally their findings insofar as they contrast with the conventional values of literacy. The picture that emerged was of a non-competitive, non-hierarchical subjectivity more responsive to the contexts of relationships than to an uncompromising belief in right and wrong. The discourse of female subjectivity was found to be less rigid, more inclined towards inclusion, more likely to express knowledge as subjectively derived, felt as much as known. Most tellingly, Tannen's distinctions between male report-talk and female rapport-talk announce very different beliefs about the use value of language. Men use language mostly to transmit information, much like the Royal Society empiricists Brody discusses. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to communicate in ways which balance message with the connection between participants.

This knowledge came to composition in association with the subjective orientation of expressivist pedagogy. The most representative example of its application is Caywood and Overing's Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender and Equity. The Caywood and Overing volume is an important example of the difficulty inherent in trying to re-imagine the

scene of writing. Despite their commitment to feminist ideals, the writers tend to measure the value of feminist pedagogies for what they confer on individual writers. The transformative power of composition for Caywood and Overing lies in its potential to give students "confidence in their own ideas and belief in their own authority" (xv). Though several writers address collaboration as a means of resocializing composing, most pursue a pedagogy that "fosters the individual voice in the classroom" (xi). As I will discuss later, the tropes of voice, authority and ownership essential to early feminist pedagogy represent a problematic alliance between the valorization of gender difference and the clichéd discourse of individualism.

What makes the student work I want to consider an unusual instance of collaboration is the collective identification that motivates and is sustained by it. Students self-identify in the classroom typically on the basis of likes and dislikes, localized social involvements, and the amalgam of tastes and preferences they have learned to consider as their unique selves. For Sharon and Iris, however, the experience they shared as women writers helped them recontextualize what might otherwise been understood as a personal trial instead of the sexism of academic literacy, language attitudes and classroom behavior.

Central to the meaning of this collaboration is its origin. Sharon and Iris had little interaction during the course, each being randomly assigned to work the entire semester in different small groups. Triggering their work together was a semester-long struggle with their respective groups and a felicitous class discussion. In short, a failure of the academic community. Sharon tells the story this way:

As the weeks progressed, my group members continued to let me down. They

> dismissed my papers as "cute, little stories." ...I felt I wasn't getting any feedback from my peers. Was this all my fault? Were my writings just stories to entertain?
>
> I wasn't the only person in my class however that had this problem with group members. Close to the end of the semester, during a class discussion, I listened to Jim describe Iris's papers as 'cute, little slices of life" that were composed of "fluff 'n' nutter." Jim explained that her writings basically said nothing. Iris just sat there. I knew how she felt though because I had been through it a million times myself and even though Jim could not comprehend the point of Iris's paper, I could.

Their resulting collaborative paper, aptly entitled "Fluff 'N' Nutter," studies the features of their own writing and considers the reception of their work by their peers and the broader classroom context. Their decision to intersperse their analysis of their own and each other's work without feeling compelled to combine them in one voice or juxtapose one reading against another is one of the ways they counter the conventional expectations for a unified text and maintain distinct selves while acting collectively. It is true that the first attempts at collaboration of many students stitch together the writing of individual participants because the difficulties of actually writing together seem insurmountable. But in this case the writers alternate, as in a dialogue, allowing each analysis to augment the others. These are writers who speak of the frustrations of writing, of the dangers.

In their study, Sharon and Iris find significance in both the style and content of their writing, supporting conclusions about women's complete discursive marginalization made by Belenky and her colleagues in Women's Ways of Knowing. Sharon lists among the

features of Iris's writing a willingness to express discomfort, a resistance to come to a set resolution and a tendency toward implicit meaning. She also comments on more typical features like the presence of humor or the use of imagery. Iris talked more of her own desire to risk more, but admits to the fear that "people would not chase after the real me." Admiring Sharon's ability to speak so openly about her family, Iris shares as a point of contrast her conscious attempts to hide her family, hide the shame of immigrant parents. What she seems to be expressing is her desire to write in a way inclusive of relationships.

Iris's analysis of Sharon's writing centers on similar themes, especially what might be called the performative nature of the language. Picking up on Sharon's statement that "I purposely play with my writing by adding underlying messages," Iris catalogs the subtleties at work: from the re-creation of childhood experience that required a child's persona and a child's language to the recurrent use of understatement when using direct discourse. Indicating the need for a high degree of reader involvement, Iris writes, "Just as people easily miss the implications of racial, sexist, or monetary remarks, Sharon's essays get pushed aside."

Involvement is one of the traits that unites these writers, a certain quality of reading, an affective dimension marked by receptivity. It is more than the false sense of agreement that often occurs between basic writers who measure rhetorical effectiveness by similarity of experience. Expectedly but quite unintentionally, I'm convinced, their paper demonstrates the kind of sensitivity missing from their small groups. Iris supports Sharon's initial sense of identification, noting that "Sharon has come closer to understanding my papers" than her male group members. This receptivity becomes evident in little

statements such as Iris's claim that "the pain of the simple words is there" or Sharon's response that she could "sense Iris's feeling of dread from this one line." In their reading of each other's work, they reveal a sensitivity to language and experience (reported by Tannen and Belenky) that unites them as writers and women. and validates their rhetorical styles. (try to mention authority coming out of this paragraph)

In her study of women writing in the academy, Gesa Kirsch identifies authority as one of the key issues for women composing their way into academic communities. Emphasizing how authority depends on audience, Kirsch reports that while all writers struggle to develop a sense of confidence, women in the academy have particular difficulty imagining "supportive and interesting audiences" and tend to internalize the skepticism about audience to indicate an uncertainty of their own ability (79).

Kirsch's findings support and complicate Bartholomae's claim that writers need to take their place in a community through discourse before they are ever extended membership. The legacy of manly rhetoric, counselling confidence and remaining true to one's own vision, fails to counter historical and daily exclusion. Kirsch's informants repeat the familiar story of taking on the discourse of the academy only to be ostracized according to the cultural logic that reserves assertive behavior for men. Equally troubling, I think, is the tendency for the concerns of women and their discursive styles to be dismissed as nonserious. At a time when personal writing enjoys great prestige in many composition programs, to invite female students to write their experiences in their primary idiom is to bring the double bind into full view. The authority that Bartholomae implies comes from a kind of pretending is harder to come by when, as Kirsch explains, women's "talk--and

writing--has been labeled trivial, illogical, or emotional"(80). If there have been scholarly inroads in the validation of women's experience, that legitimacy has yet to be a regular tenet of the general classroom environment.

Authority is precisely the issue when the classroom becomes dominated by male discursive patterns. Iris writes about a discussion in which she contradicted one of the men in the class:

> John looked me in the eyes and laughed. I was furious. I wanted to scream, "Your bully tactics don't scare me. I won't let you intimidate me!" But before I could say anything Jim and Jim ran to my aid. They told John to stop laughing at me and my opinion was very relevant. But they were as bad as John. They wouldn't let me defend myself. My anger boiled inside of me yet I said absolutely nothing.

The men acting here on behalf of Iris would be mortified to have their intervention characterized as sexist, though I think there is no doubt that their rescue functions that way. More to the point, their actions could be described as maintaining the cooperative spirit, the democratic rules of the classroom as a forum where all opinions may be heard.

But even the commitment to the "marketplace of ideas" is, as Brody shows, an outgrowth of a masculine paradigm of language use. The discursive business of such agonistic space is conducted according to male patterns of communication, a point not lost on Iris when she writes

> I didn't want to be a part of their heated loud discussion. I like a calm and level-headed approach and I think the other females in the class do as well. So during the course of the semester, the women in the class became introverts and idly

watched the tennis match of arguments between the four males.

It is ironic that she names the female style of interaction as dispassionate when for centuries the epitome of manly language was an avoidance of feminine attributes of illogic, sentiment and passion. What this appropriation of traditionally masculine values shows, I think, is the limited resources we have for explaining our language use. Often their analyses of their own and each other's writing use the conventionalized discourse of authenticity: honesty, the expression of a true self. While these student writers describe language habits that writers like Tannen and Belenky et al. have identified as socially coded as female, the language they use adopts the coordinate values of individualism and masculine discourse to justify them.[2]

The link between academic literacy and the establishment of individualism as a cultural ethos is an especially critical relation for women writers. The emergence of individualism as a theory of social relations alongside manly rhetoric complicates the problem of identifying anything like woman's discourse. The discursive colonization of human subjectivity by androcentric individualism has plagued feminism as a whole. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out in Feminism Without Illusions, feminism is embedded in traditional individualism to such an extent that it often espouses radically contradictory positions. Fox-Genovese explains that what begins as a collective movement becomes appropriated by individualistic ideology:

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[2] I have left unaddressed the critical problem of identifying the difference between the language of individualism as it falsifies socially-constructed selves and the language of agency that will always be a part of having designed to write something. The resolution to my mind has more to do with learning how not to speak the normal discourse, but I am not certain.

> in a crazy reversal, the politicization of the personal becomes the personalization of the political, in which individual women justify their own successes and arbitrary choices in the name of sisterhood: what benefits me necessarily benefits my sisters. The individual thus appropriates the being of others by claiming her individualism as the realization of collective purpose. (32)

Fox-Genovese's account of feminism's struggle to maintain a collective purpose bears a striking similarity to critiques of expressive pedagogy. Indeed, the use of expressive pedagogy aa a vehicle for feminist approaches to composition appears roughly analogous to the relationship between Enlightenment political theory and the pursuit of Women's Rights.

Many feminists have begun to take issue with the application to composition of women's discourse and epistemic modes described by Belenky, Gilligan and Tannen. Susan Jarratt is one for whom exclusive focus on nurturing, relationship-building paradigms appears to exclude the necessary strategies for engaging conflict. Her main objection is that a commitment to avoiding conflict "leaves those who adopt it insufficiently prepared to negotiate the oppressive discourses of racism, sexism, and classism in the composition classroom"(106).

Responding to the idea that the argumentative character of academic discourse perpetuates a kind of violence against women, Jarratt argues that an exclusively affirmative writing class would end up like many student-centered pedagogies in which teachers, unable to say no, end up tacitly legitimizing dominant ideology, for example "endorsing the clichés of competitive self-interest"(109). Jarratt's greatest objection is that an education

in nurturing seemingly designed to change male discourse only condemns female students to the same modes of expression and public behavior that have justified their position at the margin.

This is especially true in collaborative situations, as the experience of Iris and Sharon reveals. Unable to voice the conflict that was there, nothing save their work together enabled them to bring to light the discursive bias they faced. Here is where Jarratt helps us less. Working against essentialized notions of women's language in order to reclaim argument as "a progressive mode of discourse" (106), she seems to locate the ability to resist in one form of discursive opposition.

The point I wish to make is that collaboration can be an important avenue allowing marginalized students to occupy confrontational modes Jarratt advocates without expecting them to abandon alternative forms of expression and go it alone as the traditions of schooling have long insisted. Calling for the development of an ecofeminist poetics, Jan Swearingen speaks of the need to "promote modes of individualism that draw on collective, participatory models of knowing, meaning and action" (231). In the case of Iris and Sharon, authority was made possible through collective engagement. This requires more opportunities to identify potential communities of interest and the chance to coordinate one's experiences of belonging and exclusion, to take them outside the self.

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